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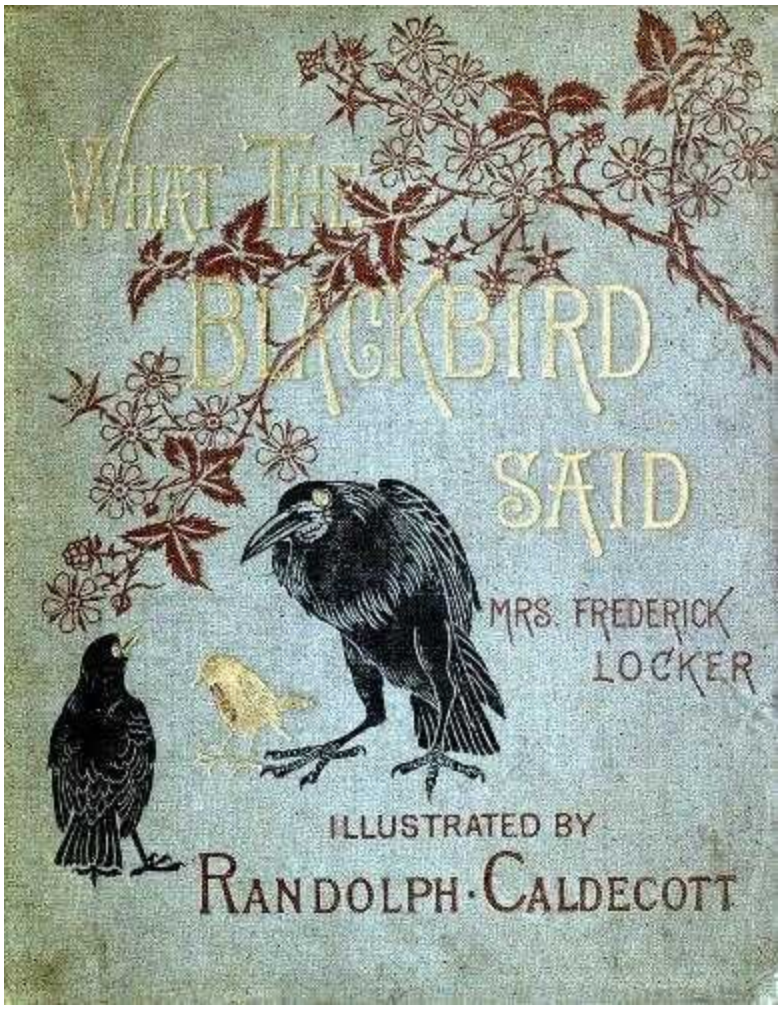


# WHAT THE BLACKBIRD SAID.

**A Story**
*IN FOUR CHIRPS.*
by
MRS. FREDERICK LOCKER.
ILLUSTRATED BY RANDOLPH CALDECOTT.
LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS
BROADWAY, LUDGATE HILL

NEW YORK: 416 BROOME STREET
1881
london: R. Clay, Sons, and Taylor, bread street hill, e.c.
to my dear children,

GODFREY AND DOROTHY,

THIS LITTLE STORY IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

BY THEIR MOTHER.

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# CHIRP THE FIRST.

The winter of 1878 was certainly an unusually dreary one, and so thought a remarkably fine young Blackbird, as he perched one morning on the bare bough of a spreading lime-tree, whose last brown leaf had fallen to the ground some weeks before.

With the exception of the Scotch firs and other fortunate evergreens, there was nothing to be seen on all sides but leafless branches standing out sharply against the cold, grey sky. The ground was frozen, and entirely covered with snow, for there had been a heavy fall during the night. The way-marks of field and road were obliterated, all was one sheet of dazzling whiteness. Here and there a little mound marked the spot where a flower-bed lay buried, and there was one narrow path where the snow was thickly piled on either side, for it had been partially swept from the centre, which showed traces of the bright brown gravel below.

The Blackbird was contemplating this landscape in a discontented and unhappy frame of mind. He was, as we have just said, a remarkably fine young bird. His plumage was of a glossy blackness, with which not even a raven’s could vie; his bright eyes looked even brighter as they gleamed from the deep yellow rims which surrounded them, and his bill resembled the polished shaft of an early crocus.

At the time at which my story begins, this Blackbird was about eight months old, and usually he was not a little vain of his appearance. On this particular morning, however, he did not feel at all so proud of himself, or especially pleased with any one or anything. He had passed the long night in a wood hard by, and had been benumbed with cold.

He had tucked his head first under one wing, and then under the other, but it had been of no use, the cutting wind had penetrated even his thick

warm feathers, and had ruffled them in a way which had sorely discomposed him, in body as well as in mind.

Then again, all through the night he had been exceedingly put out by little cold wet dabs which kept continually falling on his back. The Blackbird had changed his position—he had done it several times: he had moved from a birch to an elm, and then to a beech-tree. But it was of no avail, the little cold droppings seemed to pursue him wherever he went, and it was not till quite late in the night that he found real shelter, and got a little rest in a thick mantle of ivy which completely covered a wall near the stables.

What were these cold droppings? He could not imagine. He knew well enough they were not rain; rain always made a sharp pelting noise as it struck against the trees. But there had been no such sound, for, with the exception of the occasional sighing of the wind, the night had been a singularly noiseless one. What then could this cold, soft moisture be?

The Blackbird could not at all understand it, but as he was well sheltered, and soon got warm in the ivy, he fell asleep and forgot all about it.

The Blackbird on a small white hillock.

The next morning, however, when he woke up and peeped forth from his green canopy, he was much astonished by the sight which met his eyes. Everything was white! The green fields were gone, the lawn where he found his worms, the flower-beds where he caught his insects,—all had disappeared, and a broad, white, sparkling covering lay over everything. What was it? what could it mean?

The Blackbird had no one to explain it all to him, so he thought he would just take a short flight and find out for himself. He stretched his wings and skimmed away over the white ground, and then he thought he would rest for a while on a small white hillock.

No sooner, however, had his little dusky brown feet touched the surface of the snow, than he found he was gradually sinking down, down into a soft, but very cold white bed. With a shrill cry of alarm he flew up again, and did not stop until he alighted on the bough of the lime-tree where we were first introduced to him. What was it? What wonderful and terrible new thing was this? and where was he to go for his breakfast?

He was sitting in a very melancholy frame of mind, stretching out first one foot and then the other, when his attention was arrested by a flood of joyous song poured forth from above, and looking up, he saw a bright-breasted Robin on the bough immediately over his head.

The little bird in his scarlet and brown plumage looked more richly coloured and even more beautiful than usual, as, supported by his slender legs, with his head thrown back and his feathers puffed out, he poured forth his light-hearted carol to the leafless woods.

“How can you sing on this miserable morning?” said the Blackbird, gloomily, and indeed half contemptuously.

“Miserable morning!” replied the Robin in a tone of surprise; “why I don’t think it’s at all a miserable morning,—just look at the beautiful snow.”

“Oh, that’s what you call that white stuff down there, is it?” said the Blackbird, disdainfully gazing at the white world beneath him.

“Yes, to be sure,” said the Robin; “have you never seen snow before?”

“No,” replied the Blackbird, “I’ve not, and I shan’t break my heart if I never see it again. All last night it was dropping on my back till I was wet through and through; and just now, when I flew down to look about for my breakfast, why it all gave way under my feet, and I might have been smothered.”

“Ah,” said the Robin, shaking his head, “you won’t mind it when you get more used to it. You see you’re a young bird; this is only your first winter. Now I saw it all last winter. I’m nearly two years old.”

The Robin said this with a certain pride of seniority, and stretched himself to his full height as he looked at his younger, but much more bulky, neighbour.

“I don’t see any great advantage in being old,” said the Blackbird, sarcastically; “but since you are so experienced, perhaps you can tell me what it all means?”

“Yes, I can,” said the Robin, hopping a little nearer. “Rain, you know, comes down from the clouds up there. Well, when it gets very cold indeed, as it is just now” (here the Blackbird shivered visibly), “why, then the clouds get frozen, and instead of falling in soft, warm little drops, they come down in these white flakes, which we call snow. I am not very learned myself,” said the Robin, humbly, “but a very wise friend of mine, an old Rook, told me all this, and he also said that if I examined a flake of snow, I should find it was made of beautiful crystals, each shaped like a little star.”

“Indeed,” said the Blackbird, “that is very curious, but, in the meantime, I should very much like to know what I am to do for something to eat. The fruit is all gone from the garden, and I can’t find any insects in the snow. Ivy-berries will be poorish eating day after day.”

“What do all your friends do?” asked the Robin.

“I don’t see much of my friends,” replied the Blackbird; “we Blackbirds are not so mighty fond of each other’s company, we like to live alone, we never,” he said this rather loftily, “talk much to strangers; in fact, during this cold weather, we don’t care to talk to each other.”

“Every one must judge for himself,” quoth the Robin, “but methinks it would be rather a dull world if none of us spoke to each other when it was cold. You see it’s very often cold here in old England, and the winters are very long and dark. I should like to know what we should all do without a little cheerful talk, and an occasional snatch of song?”

“As to singing,” struck in the Blackbird, “I’ve been so hoarse these last two months, that it’s only when the sun is very bright indeed that I can sing

at all, and all my friends are in the same plight. There are no leaves on the trees, there is no music in the woods, there is no sunshine to speak of, and it's altogether exceedingly dull."

The Robin did not exactly know how to reply to this wail of discontent, so he gathered himself together and poured forth a bright little song.

"How is it," said the Blackbird suddenly, "that you have all at once become such a great songster? I never remember hearing your voice in the summer."

"Ah, that's it," replied the Robin, "many people think I only sing in the winter, but in reality I sing quite as well, and better too, for that matter, in the summer. The truth is that it's very difficult for me to make myself heard when the larks are singing so gloriously, and the thrushes, and the nightingales—not to speak of yourself," said the Robin, turning round politely. "Now, however," he continued, "there are so few woodland notes, that I think my poor little pipe may be more welcome, and I do my best."

Again the Robin carolled, and as the Blackbird listened he said, with a certain air of respect, "You are a good little bird, Mr. Robin, and I feel the better for having heard your song; all the same, however, if we are to have much of this wretched snow, I should just like to know what I am to do for my food?"

His song ended, the Robin had been preparing to fly away, but at these words he drew in his little brown wings again, and said, "I hope we may meet again in a few days, and that you may then be happier than you are just now. In the meantime, however, it may be a help to you to hear something which my good friend the old Rook once told me, and which I have never forgotten. He said that the great God Who made you and me, and the snow, and everybody and everything, would never forget any of us, for He not only thinks of us, but, can you believe it, not one of those poor little sparrows falls to the ground without His knowing it. We don't think

much of the sparrows," continued the Robin, "they are low, mischievous creatures, but God feeds them, so I'm sure He won't let us starve. I'm only a very small bird myself, but the thought that I'm taken care of makes me feel very happy."

Then away flew the Robin, leaving the Blackbird on the bare branch, with much to think about. He had heard many new and startling things that morning, and now as he gazed at the snow-covered world, it was with a happier feeling; the little Robin's discourse had not been altogether thrown away.

It was getting late, and as yet the Blackbird had had no breakfast. He determined, therefore, to make an expedition in search of food, and his sable wings were soon bearing him swiftly over the sparkling snow. He first flew to a wood not very far off, and as he alighted on a small hazel-branch he noticed, just beyond him, a fine holly, and in spite of the snow he could see that it was covered with scarlet berries. How was it that he had never noticed that beautiful bush before? The ripe berries looked very tempting, and he had soon made as substantial a meal as any hungry Blackbird could desire—indeed he left one bough almost bare. He felt all the better after this breakfast, and took quite a long excursion over the snow-covered woods and fields in the neighbourhood.

It was very remarkable how many trees he now found covered with berries; he had never noticed such a number before. In one hedgerow, leafless though it was, he discovered a hawthorn-bush, and its small black berries, hard though they proved to be, formed by no means a contemptible luncheon, even after the softer scarlet ones he had disposed of at breakfast. There was a mountain ash too, just on the other side of the hedge, upon the fruit of which this keen-eyed Blackbird made up his mind to regale himself at no very distant period. Altogether, his day, which had begun so unpromisingly, was a decided success, and that night, as he fluttered to rest in the ivy, and saw the little silver stars peeping and twinkling at him

through the warm green curtains of his canopy, he thought of all the little Robin's wise words. It was with a chirp of sincere thankfulness that he tucked his head under his wing.

The next morning was sunny, but frosty and very cold. Before leaving the ivy-bush, our Blackbird ate a few of the dark berries which clustered thickly around him. They were not, perhaps, quite so good as the holly or hawthorn berries, but still they were better than nothing at all.

He then flew from the ivy to his favourite branch on the lime-tree, and he was not a little pleased to find that his small red-breasted friend was there before him.

"Well," quoth the Robin, as he paused in his carol to welcome his friend, "how do you find yourself this morning?"

"Better," replied the Blackbird, "much better." He then gave the Robin an account of all his experiences of the day before, and observed how curious it was that in one short day he should have discovered so many new kinds of berries.

"It is remarkable indeed," said the Robin: "now I wonder what my old friend the Rook up there would have to say about it."

The Rook was at that very moment sailing in slow circles round the top of a neighbouring elm-tree. For centuries he and his ancestors had built their nests in the particular avenue of elms of which this tree was one of the tallest. It so happened that the Rook was just starting off for his morning constitutional, and as he finished his round, and then swept slowly across the meadow below, very deliberately flapping his great dusky wings, he came in sight of the lime-tree on which the Robin was perched.

Out flew the Robin, and then back again to attract the Rook's attention. When the Rook saw this, he slowly gathered in his wings and swung himself on to a branch close to his little friend.

He certainly was a very sedate, and even solemn-looking gentleman, at least so thought the Blackbird. His plumage was anything but bright and

glossy, in fact it looked very shabby indeed, as if he had worn it for some seasons without a change, and had been out in much rough weather. His dark eyes were relieved by no merry twinkle; then there were small bare patches (which were not over beautiful) on his neck; and his voice was exceedingly hoarse and unmusical. But notwithstanding all this, there was a certain quiet dignity, and an air of ripe wisdom about the old bird which much impressed our hero, and made him listen with respect to whatever words of wisdom fell from the blue beak, although they were uttered in rather a croaky tone.

After the usual “good mornings” had passed, and the Blackbird had been presented in due form to the Rook, the Robin said, “How comes it, Mr. Rook, that there are so many new berries on the bushes?”

“You ask how it is, my little friend,” said the Rook, kindly; “well, I will tell you. Just now, when no insects can be had, what should we all do if we had no berries? Now that the leaves have all fallen, we can find the berries much more easily. Many of them were there already, only you didn’t see them. They are provided for us by our Heavenly Father. As each season comes round, God gives us the fruits of that season, and when one kind of food fails, He provides us with another. I am an old bird,” continued the Rook, “but I’ve never known the seasons to fail. We do not ‘sow, nor do we gather into barns,’ but still ‘God feeds us.’ I always look forward, and hopefully too, to every season as it comes—Spring,—Summer,—Autumn,—Winter,—and, my young friends, you will be wise to do the same, for, do you know, this trustful feeling is called ‘faith.’”

The Rook then shut his learned beak, and opened and spread his wide black wings, and slowly sailed away, leaving the Blackbird and the Robin to meditate on all that he had been telling them. At last the Robin broke silence with “Have you breakfasted?”

“Yes, I have,” replied the Blackbird, “on a few poor ivy-berries, but I’m still rather hungry.”

“Then come with me,” said the Robin, “and you shall soon have a right good feast.” Off the birds flew, and swiftly passed over one or two snow-covered fields, and then by a long avenue of lime-trees. They came at last to a level lawn, at the end of which stood an old gabled mansion, built of gray stone; ivy climbed round the pillars of an arcade at the east end of the house, and ivy covered the west corner. The time-stained gables, surmounted by round stone balls, stood out in the sunshine, and the dark tiles of the roof peeped out here and there from their snowy covering. The two friends flew to the west side of the mansion, which overlooked a smooth grassy terrace and garden. Beyond was a lake, and then came a wood behind which the sun sank, each evening, to rest. Gray gables rose on this side of the house also, and there was a large bay window which the Blackbird soon discovered to be the window of the dining-room. There were some thick laurel-bushes beyond this window, to which the two birds flew, and then they stopped to rest and look about them. The Blackbird gazed admiringly at the old house, and with especial interest at the bay window.

Standing there was quite the dearest little couple he had ever seen, a little girl and boy.

The boy was a brave little man of about four years of age, with two dark eyes, and thick curly brown hair. His face was positively brimming over with fun and mischief. Standing by his side, and clasping his hand with plump little fingers, was a little girl of some two and a half years. She had a round baby face, gray eyes, and the sweet bloom of babyhood was on her cheek. Her eyes had that wondering, far-away look, which is so very bewitching in quite little children, and her small rosy mouth showed some very white teeth, especially when she laughed, which was not by any means seldom.

It was evident that these little ones were waiting for something of interest, for they stood very patiently, and their eyes were fixed on the grass

beneath the fir-trees. At the moment we are describing the redbreast flew from one laurel-bush to another, and then with a shout of delight, the little children suddenly disappeared from the window. In a minute however they were back again with faces full of expectation and importance, bearing between them a plate of bread which had been carefully broken into small pieces.

One of the large windows, which opened to the ground, was then flung back, and the little boy, advancing carefully, scattered the crumbs on the gravel path just beyond the window. The window was then softly closed, and hand-in-hand the little children stood still to watch. The opening and shutting of the window had frightened the Blackbird; he had flown to a more distant bush; but as the more courageous Robin only fluttered about for a moment, the Blackbird soon came back, and in less than a minute the Robin was upon the gravel path hard at work picking up the dainty white crumbs. The Blackbird still hesitated on the laurel branch, loth to remain, yet fearful to advance, but at last, impelled by a sudden pang of hunger, he ventured to join his red-breasted friend.

It was a most luxurious repast; never before had the Blackbird tasted food half so delicious. It is true that he got one or two frights, for once the little girl was so delighted at the sight of both birds devouring the crumbs, that she banged her little fat hands against the window-pane, dancing at the same time with delight. This gambol fairly startled their feathered guests, and frightened them away for a minute or two, but they were soon back again, and then the Blackbird saw that the boy was carefully holding his sister’s hands to keep her quiet.

Each morning found the little eager faces waiting at the window, and each morning also found the two expectant birds perched on the laurel-bushes. The feathered company was soon swelled by the arrival of some impudent and very quarrelsome sparrows, a pair of chaffinches, and a darling little blue titmouse, who, with his cousin a cole-titmouse, soon

became quite at their ease. By common consent all the other birds avoided the sparrows. “They are common, idle creatures, you know,” said the Robin, “and none of us care to associate with such low, vulgar birds.”

The Blackbird, through the kindness of his little friend the Robin, soon got acquainted with many other birds, and indeed he grew quite intimate with a gaily apparelled Goldfinch. However, notwithstanding all this, the Blackbird found it difficult to make friends, and could never be quite so much at his ease as his more sociable red-breasted companion.

One day the Robin confided to the Blackbird a great discovery that he and the Goldfinch had made. They had come upon a large barn, and there, close to the roof, they had found a small hole. It was very small indeed, but, after some hesitation, they had squeezed through it, and had found themselves in a large room filled with huge sacks of corn, oats and barley. Their delight at this discovery was not to be described, any more than the feast they subsequently made. Mice, and even rats, were scampering about in every direction, gnawing holes in the sacks, and getting into all manner of mischief.

“We were afraid of the rats at first,” said the Robin, “but we soon found that they were much too busy to trouble their heads about us. The Goldfinch is very anxious that the sparrows should not find out this barn. They are greedy and quarrelsome, and would keep it all to themselves, and try to turn us out.”

The Blackbird soon found his way to the corn sacks, but he and his friends were uncommonly circumspect whenever they met any sparrows. They would even pretend that they were going in quite another direction; they would fly straight by the barn, and then wait patiently in a neighbouring tree or hedgerow, and not return till they were certain of not being noticed.

It must be confessed that the process of squeezing through the small dark hole was not altogether an agreeable arrangement, it sadly disturbed

our smart friend’s smooth, glossy feathers. The mice too, to say nothing of the rats, were not congenial companions. But the corn was so good that it made amends for all these drawbacks.

Thus the winter passed by very happily, and what with the berries, red and black, the corn, and best of all, the crumbs, the Blackbird never wanted for food.

Not the least pleasant part of the day was the morning, when he paid his visit to the bay window, where the little children were always ready for him. No wonder he grew very fond of them, and soon learnt their names, “*Willie*” and “*Alice*,” which he would often repeat to himself as he fell asleep in the ivy, and thought of the little boy and girl fast asleep too, and of the happy meeting which they were all looking forward to in the morning.

END OF CHIRP THE FIRST.

# CHIRP THE SECOND.

## spring.

The days were certainly becoming longer and less cold, the snow had altogether disappeared, and somehow the sun seemed, to the Blackbird, to get up earlier and go to bed later. He noticed also, about this time, that little

shaft-like leaves were beginning to peep through the grass, and that the beech and hazel twigs were swelling into small knobs. He also felt that there was something different in himself—a change—he was stronger and happier, and he was seized with an irresistible desire to sing. The hoarseness which had tried him so much during the winter months had gone, and his throat was once more clear.

A week passed by, the little knobs on the trees began to open and discover small, tender leaves, and between the green spear-like shoots in the grass delicate stems had come up bearing white drooping flowers.

One morning the Blackbird discussed all these changes with the Robin; and the Rook, who happened to be flying by, was called in to assist at their council.

"You are surprised at all these changes, my young friends," he said; "did I not tell you that the seasons never fail? This is the Spring, the time when everything comes forth to new life. The snow has overspread the earth and kept it warm all these months. It has covered the bulbs of the snowdrops, those white flowers that you so greatly admire, friend Blackbird. It covered them up carefully till the proper time arrived that they should spring forth. In the same way the buds on the trees have been wrapped up in their brown coats and kept warm during the bitter winter weather, and now that the sun is once more shining, the said brown coats are beginning to drop off, for the little green leaves are pushing their way into the world of warmth and sunshine. And then, not the least interesting change, your song has once more returned to you, the woods are full of sweet music,—ay, and you will see yet greater wonders, for truly 'the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land.'"

Yes, the Rook was quite right; each day now brought about some fresh wonder—a few more green leaves, a few more white flowers; and presently

between the snowdrop plants came up the slender green leaves, and the gold and purple blossoms of the crocus.

About this time, too, the Blackbird noticed that many of his feathered friends were unusually busy. They seemed to have no time for talk. He met them flying hither and thither with feathers, small pieces of straw, or twigs, in their beaks. About this time also, the Blackbird himself felt a strong desire to have a nest of his own. But how could he build it by himself? He must find a partner to share his labours—and where could he find such a partner? He was almost in despair, so at last he determined to pour out his desire in song, as he perched one morning on the branch of a budding hawthorn.

He sang his sweetest, his very best, and as the song was borne along on the bright morning air, and then died away, he became aware of a tender little note, a faint twitter which came from a branch immediately beneath him. He looked down, and, lo and behold, there, half concealed by spreading boughs, was a bird like himself, another Blackbird! This stranger Blackbird was very attractive-looking, but its plumage was not quite so bright or black as his own. Its bill, too, was more brown than yellow, and the orange streaks round the eyes were of a greenish hue. But notwithstanding these slight differences, the bird which now hopped down on the grass, and answered his song by if possible a sweeter warble, was both handsome and winning. The Blackbird was delighted to have thus found so immediate a response to his petition, and he was very soon on the grass beside the interesting stranger. On nearer approach he found that this Blackbird had gentle eyes, and was indeed altogether very bewitching, so without any hesitation he proposed that they should build a nest together! His offer was shyly accepted, and then came the important question, where to build?

The Blackbird was anxious not to be too far from his little friends Willie and Alice. They had been so kind to him during the winter, that he

would fain see something of them still, and sing them his best songs, now that he had his voice back again. He had watched them the day before, as they trotted hand-in-hand along the home-meadow where the snowdrops and crocuses grew. They had pulled some of the white and yellow blossoms, and had then stood still to listen to the flute-like voice of an unseen minstrel. Hand-in-hand they listened; the little boy with his large brown eyes fixed on the tree from whence came the song, the little girl with her baby-face uplifted, and one pink finger held up as much as to say "Hush! hush!"

The song ended, the Blackbird flew out from the shelter of the thick fir-tree where he had been concealed, and winged his way across the meadow.

"Our Blackbird!" cried the little boy, exultingly. "Our Blackbird!"

"Dicky! dicky!" shouted the little girl, and then they ran home delighted.

Yes, this songster was their own particular Blackbird, there was no doubt about it; and did it not behove him to build his nest as near their home as he possibly could?

After a short consultation, the pair of Blackbirds set off on an exploring expedition. First of all they carefully examined the ivy which covered an old wall near the stables: but they did not consider the stems of the ivy were quite strong enough to support their nest. They then looked at some laurel-bushes. But no, these would not do. The position was too exposed, the branches were much too far apart, their nest would soon be discovered. Then a very compact little evergreen bush on the lawn in front of the old house caught their eyes. It was thick and well grown, every branch was covered, so that a nest could not be seen by the passers-by. Yes, it was the very place for them, there they might build in security, and at the same time watch their dear little friends as they went out and about each day. They carefully inspected each bough of the said bush, and then, having

chosen a spot at the lower end of a branch where it joined the main stem, they set to work to build in right good earnest. Small twigs, the waifs and strays of last autumn, strewed the ground in a little wilderness hard by, and thither the Blackbirds repaired. Hour after hour both might be seen flitting between the wood and their chosen bush, with twigs in their yellow beaks. These they neatly laid on the branch, and then twisted them in and out, and round and round each other, and then a little moss and a few soft fibres were added to the harder twigs. The whole fabric soon began to assume a round, nest-like appearance. It grew fair and shapely, and the exultant Blackbird paused to pour forth a “clear, mellow, bold song,” as he alighted for a moment on the summit of the Deodor. Then he and his gentle partner, feeling the “keen demands of appetite,” determined to go and refresh themselves with some food, and they repaired to a field not very far off.

There they found the Rook hopping along the freshly-turned furrows, eagerly picking up the grubs which had been brought to the surface by the plough-share. The repast did not look very inviting,—those small, gray grubs! But it was the Rook’s favourite food, and the farmers were not sorry that he and his feathered friends should make a meal of that same gray grub, for these insects sometimes destroy whole acres of grass. They bury themselves in the turf, and then it turns brown and dies. These grubs are mischievous indeed,—after remaining for some time in the grub state, they change into cockchafers, and even then they are by no means agreeable visitors.

“Good morning, my friend,” said the polite old Rook, “this is a very pleasant change of food after the hard winter berries, isn’t it?”

“Indeed, it is,” replied the Blackbird, picking up a grub, “but I like better feeding near the hedgerows; however, this isn’t bad after a hard day’s work.”

“Oh, you are house building, are you?” said the Rook. “I hope you have chosen wisely, and got a good mate to work with you, one who is

industrious and affectionate."

"I think I have," said the Blackbird, with a certain amount of proper pride; "but you shall judge for yourself," he added, as he presented his young wife to the Rook. The Rook made a quaint sort of movement with his head, which, probably among birds, passed for a very grave and polite bow, and after looking at her for a few moments, he nodded his approval.

"We are all rather sad to-day," said the Rook, after a few moments of silence; "we have just lost a very dear friend—indeed a cousin of mine." The Blackbird looked grave and sympathetic, and the Rook continued, "He started off yesterday evening to get some supper, and found his way to some grass-land which was being destroyed by these mischievous little grubs; he was busy pecking away at them, when all of a sudden we, who were in a tree hard by, heard a fearful noise, and saw a great deal of smoke. In another moment, as the smoke cleared away, we saw my poor cousin lying on the ground. He was quite dead; a young farmer had shot him with a terrible gun, thinking he was doing mischief; the stupid fellow little knew what good service my cousin was engaged upon in eating those grubs. This affair has made us all very sad indeed," said the Rook, with a little extra huskiness in his voice: "poor fellow, he had just begun building his first nest, and his young widow is completely broken hearted."

The Blackbird was very grieved for his friend's trouble, and he felt rather uncomfortable besides, for it occurred to him that the same wretched man might very likely shoot him some evening, and then what would become of *his* little wife? He therefore prepared to fly off, but before doing so he said, "I hope we sha'n't be shot also, for these grubs are easier food to get at than the snails. I got hold of some snails this very morning, and my bill still aches with the trouble they gave me. I dropped them on the stones to break them, but one, and he was a fat fellow too, was so obstinate he would neither come out of his shell, nor could I crack it. So after ten minutes hard work I was obliged to leave the rascal. They are stubborn

creatures, these snails," said the Blackbird, with a groan that expressed his deep sense of injury.

"*That* they are," replied the Rook, "and they ought to be taught better."

A few days more went by and then the nest in the evergreen bush was completed. The inside walls, which were of mud, had been perhaps the most difficult part of the building, for although the Blackbirds would very often start off with a nice piece of soft mud in their beaks, it would get dry, in a very tiresome manner, before they could reach the nest, and it then crumbled to pieces as they tried to plaster it on the twigs. The birds persevered, however, and the mud walls were at last substantially built, and to crown the whole, a lining of soft grass was added.

The Blackbird was so over-joyed when the nest was finished, that, after carefully examining it outside to see that each twig was in its proper place, and looking at the neatly finished interior, he flew off to the laurel-bushes by the bay window and sang a song of such surpassing ecstasy that two little brown heads soon made their appearance at a bed-room window to listen. The little figures were clothed in long white night-dresses, for they were just going to bed, but they could not miss such a song. I am sure that if it could have been interpreted it would have proved to be a chant of joy and praise. The nest was completed, the home was ready!

That night as long brown lashes sank over soft sleepy eyes the little heads that belonged to them were still thinking of that jubilant carol, and about the same time, under the shelter of the ivy leaves, two other and much smaller heads were full of dreams of the future, of the newly-built home in the evergreen, and of all that new home might mean.

Some two days after this the Blackbird happened to be perched on the branch of a dark fir-tree. His young mate had been for some time sitting steadily on the nest in the evergreen bush. To amuse her he had sung some of his sweetest songs. He could not see her very distinctly through the thick branches, so he thought he would just go and have a look at her. He flew to

the bush, and there was a sight which, for a moment, made him feel almost breathless. His mate was perched on the bough above the nest, but what was that in the nest below?

Down in its very centre lay a round, smooth, pale blue object, shaded with light green, and marked at one end with reddish brown spots. There it lay securely, snugly; and it looked very fresh and beautiful. The Blackbird hopped nearer. What could it be? Was it really an egg? Yes, it was indeed an egg! His delight was so great that he could only express it in song, and the deep flute-like notes sounded from the little bush quite late into the twilight of that evening.

A few more days saw four eggs added to the first. Yes, five little blue balls now lay side by side. As his industrious little wife flew off to get supper the evening that the last egg was laid, the happy Blackbird perched himself on the very top of the bush, to guard the nest and sing his evening song. He had not been there very long when he heard a door bang, and presently from under the old porch came the dear little couple he loved so well, the little one in her white frock and white hat, the other in his sailor's suit.

They ran together across the grass, but stopped suddenly as they heard the Blackbird's note, and the Blackbird as suddenly ceased singing, for how terrible would it be if they should discover his nest and all his treasures!

The sharp eyes of the little boy had already espied him, and the little feet scampered lightly over the ground. The poor Blackbird's heart sank within him. Nearer, still nearer came the brother and sister, and at last they stopped close by the bush. The Blackbird rose into the air with a shrill, scared cry, and then settled again. Would they hurt him? Could they be so cruel as to rob him of his treasures?

"He *must* have a nest somewhere," said the little boy, as he peeped cautiously into the bush.

What was that dark thing on the bough above? The little fellow clapped his hands, wild with excitement. “A nest! a nest!” he cried. The little girl fairly danced with delight. Then the boy slowly put out his hand and caught the bough, and carefully bent it towards him. All this time two black eyes were watching with intense anxiety from the tree-top.

Would the eggs fall out and be broken? would the nest be robbed?

“One, two, three, four, five,” counted the little boy slowly, while a poor palpitating heart counted each moment. How long those moments seemed!

The little boy still held the bough in his grasp, the nest was on one side, he stretched out his eager little hand.

The Blackbird scarcely breathed. The boy’s fingers were over the nest; they nearly closed on one of the eggs. Then he suddenly drew back, “No, no, Alice,” he said, “Mamma says I must never rob the poor birds. We won’t rob our own Blackbird.”

Then the branch was slowly released and returned to its place, and the little fellow, who with no small amount of self-denial had conquered the intense desire to take the eggs, stood still gazing at the bush. Little Miss Alice now made signs that she wished to be lifted up to see into the nest, and with no small difficulty her sturdy young brother obliged her.

“Look, Alice, pretty eggs; but we mustn’t touch, and we mustn’t tell any one.”

At that moment the front door of the old manor house again opened, and this time a voice called, “Master Willie, Miss Alice, wherever have you got to?”

At hearing this sudden appeal, Willie dropped his little sister, both because her weight was rather more than he could well support, and because he was afraid that “Nanny” might find out what they were doing. However, as Alice fell on the grass she was not hurt. Willie quickly helped

her up, and, as they ran towards the house, the Blackbird heard Willie say, “We won’t tell any one about our nest, will we? It’s a great secret.”

It was some time before the poor bird recovered from his terrible fright. His little heart beat very fast, and when his wife returned, and he told her all about the children’s visit, it was with bated and often-interrupted breath.

That night his sleep was disturbed by very unpleasant dreams. He had visions of numbers of little boys who kept coming to look at his nest, and who pulled the bough down to the ground. Then he saw the eggs rolling out slowly one after the other on to the lawn. And then he would wake with a start to find that after all it was only a dream, and would see the bright moonlight shining on the dewy grass, and hear afar off the hoarse trill of the night-jar, or the boding screech of the great white owl.

All that night he could not help feeling nervous, and he was very glad indeed when the first streaks of dawn became visible in the far east. It was a bright spring morning, and as he and his sprightly little wife hopped nimbly about on the daisy-spangled lawn, ere the dew had disappeared from the little pink and white flowers, and as they here and there picked up a worm or an insect, he felt wonderfully refreshed, indeed by the time he had taken his morning bath, and had plumed his feathers, he was quite himself again.

The thirteen days which now followed were very important ones; for, during that time, our Blackbird’s patient young wife sat almost uninterruptedly upon her nest. She stole away for a few moments to the neighbouring hedgerows for breakfast or dinner; but she was never happy till she was back again to her precious charge.

It was at this time that the Blackbird poured forth his very best music. He had never sung so many nor such varied songs before; now that his partner could not go about with him, he had so much to tell her of his rambles and of course he told it all in song.

He did not always perch on their own bush. He was afraid that if he did so he might attract too much attention, but from the bough of any tree close at hand he cheered her heart with his beautiful melodies.

The Robin’s Nest.

Then it was that he told his wife of the green hedgerows where the golden, star-shaped blossoms of the celandine were luxuriant, and where the shy primroses were just beginning to show their pale heads. He would sing of the blackthorn whose snowy blooms were then just peeping out, and of the hawthorn already covered with its tender green leaves. He told her, and this was a profound secret, of the nest of their good friend, the Robin, which was very cunningly concealed at the top of the ivy. It was a soft, cosy little nest, not plastered with mud as theirs was, but lined with silky hair. The

Robin had shown him five little pale eggs, white spotted with brown, at the bottom of the nest, half hidden by the soft hair.

The Blackbird had also come across a most remarkable nest, that of the golden-crested wren. “My old friend, the Rook, tells me,” said the Blackbird, “that this wren is the very smallest of our birds. He certainly is a great beauty with his crown of golden feathers. His nest is in yonder yew-tree. It seems large for a bird of his size. It is almost entirely built of moss, and, can you believe it, the wren uses spider’s webs to bind it together! It seemed to be hanging from the bough, and was so well hidden by another bough, that I did not see it until I had flown quite into the middle of the tree. The opening in the nest is so small, I don’t believe you could have got even your little head in; but I had a good peep, and saw its lining of soft warm feathers, and counted ten of the palest, tiniest eggs you can possibly imagine.”

The following day the Blackbird had other tidings for his wife. He had been to a stream in the neighbourhood,—the Brawl. Its banks were gay with marsh marigolds, and while he was hopping and frisking about there, he had met a very curious-looking bird, a ring-ousel. This creature was rather shy and had not long arrived from the south, where he usually spent the winter. He was a pretty fellow, with black plumage and a white crescent round his throat, and his song was very sweet indeed. He had few relations in England, for he was what folks call a rare bird, and the Blackbird was sorry for it, for he thought him both pretty and attractive.

The following day the Blackbird had a long talk with the Rook. The latter was perched on an elm, whose leaves were just beginning to burst forth, and it was there that the Blackbird joined him. Rooks’ nests, made of rough-looking sticks, many of them containing one or more blue eggs, were to be seen dotted here and there along the avenue of elms, and the cawing and the gossip, to say nothing of the quarrelling, was almost deafening. The Blackbird settled on a bough close to the Rook, and as he did so he noticed

some swallows skimming over the lawn far below them. They were beautiful birds, their blue-black plumage glinted in the sunshine, and now and then a quick turn displayed their brown throats and white breasts. They were darting hither and thither, so rapidly that the eye could hardly follow them, catching the many-winged insects as they flew by. Then they would suddenly dart off to the topmost gables of the old mansion, where their compact mud nests could be plainly seen against the dark gray stones.

"I remember," said the Blackbird, "watching those swallows a long, long time ago, when I was quite a fledgeling; but I haven't seen one all the winter. Where can they have been all this time?"

"Oh," replied the Rook, "the swallows are most curious and interesting creatures. When October comes they assemble from all parts of Great Britain and then start forth on a long journey across the wide seas to pass the winter in sunnier and warmer countries. When April returns they all come back again,—from the palms of Africa, over the olives of Italy and the oaks of Spain—back across the seas they come to us. It is here that they build their nests and rear their young ones, but only to fly away again in the autumn. Truly, these swallows are wonderful travellers."

"How nice it must be to spend the winter in a warm, sunny place," remarked the Blackbird, enviously.

"Well, I don't know," retorted the Rook; "think of the long, long journey! Think of the miles and miles of ocean to be crossed, think of the weary wings, think of the poor breathless birds. They often perch to rest a while on the passing ships, and they often get knocked down and killed. Then again, just think how they must suffer from the cold here in England, after the warm climates they have wintered in. No, depend upon it," said the Rook, shaking his head wisely, "it's far better to spend the winter here at home and get healthy and hardy. There are many nights when you and I are warm and comfortable that these unhappy swallows are crouched shivering

under the eaves. In my humble opinion there's nothing like England, dear old England, for English birds."

You see this old Rook was very patriotic, and of course a great Tory to boot. He disliked change of every sort and kind. He, and his ancestors before him, had built in these same elm-trees, since the first gray stone of the old mansion had been laid. From these same trees, from generation to generation, they had watched the sun rise and set during the stormy days of winter and the sunny days of summer. They had noted the seasons as they came and went, enjoying the fruits and the joys of each, and when any rook was cut off by death, it was generally old age that killed him,—unless it were that occasionally a youngster, more enterprising than prudent, would lean out of his nest to see the world around him, and what was going on there, and then a sudden rush of his small body through the air, and a thud at the foot of the tree, would tell of the premature decease of a promising rooklet. Yes, "Old England for ever!" was still the watchword of the rooks.

"Certainly it is very delightful just now," said the Blackbird, looking round him. Delicate young leaves were bursting forth on every side; primroses, anemones, and even a few early cowslips were peering through the grass below, the sun was shining, and the woods were filled with a chorus of song.

"Yes indeed," said the Rook solemnly "'the stork in the heavens knoweth her appointed time, and the turtle, and the crane, and the swallow observe the time of their coming.'"

This conversation, and all his other talks and small adventures, were faithfully reported to the home-tied wife. His voice beguiled the many weary hours during which she patiently sat on her nest.

It was thus that matters went on until towards the end of the thirteenth day, when certain mysterious sounds were heard to proceed from the nest, faint peckings, which would cease and then begin again. One day, while his wife was taking her mid-day meal, the Blackbird hopped close to the nest,

and put his head over the side, and as he watched and listened, lo and behold, through a slight crack in the blue shell of one of the eggs peeped a very tiny beak!

It was very marvellous! This beak moved backwards and forwards, and in and out, and gradually, the crack becoming larger, a small featherless head emerged. Yes, so it was; and before sunset the following day five callow little birds lay huddled together in the nest, and although they were his own sons and daughters, it must be confessed that the Blackbird could not help thinking them remarkably ugly. They had very few feathers on their poor naked little bodies, their heads appeared to be of an enormous and disproportionate size,—and then, their mouths!

As they squatted in the nest with their five mouths opened to their widest, displaying five red throats, the Blackbird thought that never before in all his long life had he seen anything so frightful. How such enormous creatures had ever come out of those five pretty little eggs he could not imagine. However, he had no time for reflection, for what on earth did those eager little monsters mean by gaping at him like that?

At last it occurred to him that they might be hungry, and thereupon he and his wife set off to pick up small worms and insects for them. The Blackbird fancied that being so very young they would require delicate feeding, but this proved to be an entire mistake. Never before had he thought it possible that such small bodies could dispose of so much food. From morning to night, and almost from night to morning, he and his poor wife were to be seen flying backwards and forwards conveying provisions to the nest.

However, none of the brood ever seemed to be satisfied. Five mouths always opened wide when the Blackbird returned, although he could only feed one at a time, and he never, for the life of him, could remember which he had fed last.

Worms, grubs, caterpillars, insects, all found their way to the little gaping mouths,—nothing came amiss, until the Blackbird felt that if it went on much longer there would be no insects left in the whole country, and that his young ones would certainly die of indigestion. However, the little birds flourished, and grew apace, and each night as the Blackbird drew in his wings for a few short hours of rest, he wondered when the brood would be old enough to feed themselves, for he looked forward, and with no small longing, to that time of rest.

END OF CHIRP THE SECOND.

# CHIRP THE THIRD.

## summer.

It is not to be supposed that our little friends Willie and Alice made but that one visit to the Blackbird’s nest. No, at some hour or other of each day the small couple stole across the lawn to peep at the mother as she sat on her nest. At first, the birds were rather alarmed by these visitations, but they soon grew accustomed to them, more especially when they found that their young friends meant no harm.

One morning, on going to the nest, Willie was very much surprised to find that a wonderful change had taken place. The pretty little blue eggs had

disappeared, and behold, in their place were five callow, gaping creatures! Alice was also very much interested, and it was but natural that she should insist upon seeing what excited her brother so much. Willie, therefore, after considerable difficulty, raised her sufficiently high to let her have a good look at the funny little heads. At the sight of them, Alice kicked her little feet with joy, which caused her to slip quickly through Willie's arms on to the grass. Her fresh white frock was a good deal tumbled in consequence, and her hat had fallen off in the scramble.

At this critical moment their nurse, Mrs. Barlow, appeared on the scene. "Master Willie! Master Willie!" she called, "how often I've told you not to lift Miss Alice. She's a deal too heavy for you; and look how you've tumbled her clean white frock. There'll be an accident some day, or my name's not Barlow. I won't have you dragging her about the country in this way; before you've done you'll make a regular tom-boy of her, and, bless her heart, she's a real delicate little lady."

Master Willie tried to look penitent, and he secretly hoped their beloved nest would not be discovered. However, the nurse had her suspicions of their bush, so she walked straight up to it and then round it.

"Well, I do declare," she said at last, "there's a nest, and that's what you've been after, is it? Well, of all the nasty, horrid little things that ever I saw these birds are the nastiest. Bless me, I wonder now how they get along, and no nurse to look after them."

*What fun they must have*, was Willie's secret thought. They could rove about the country at their "own sweet will," and never think about tumbling their clothes. But then he remembered that the birds hadn't got any clothes to speak of, and that, as yet, they couldn't even fly. He therefore began to wonder how they did manage without a nurse, and thought he should like to try, just for a week or two, how *he* could get along without one. What climbings, delightful wanderings, and general mischief presented themselves to his childish imagination! *what* fun he and Alice would have!

“Whatever bird is it?” said the nurse.

“*Our* Blackbird,” replied Willie, with an air of considerable importance.

“*Your* Blackbird!” she said; “why, whatever does the child mean? Well, anyhow, the gardener will soon make short work of the Blackbirds, nasty mischievous things!—why, they eat up all the fruit, and destroy the flowers.”

“Oh, Nanny,” cried the little boy sadly, “don’t say that, our Blackbird is so good, he sings beautifully, and we are so fond of him. The gardener mustn’t kill our Blackbird.” Tears stood in the soft brown eyes, and Nanny, who was really a kind-hearted woman, hastened to say that she didn’t at all suppose that that particular Blackbird would be killed, it was only that birds in general were such destructive creatures, that the fewer of them there were left about, the better.

Willie, however, was not altogether consoled, and he could not help feeling that Nanny was not so sympathetic as she might be about his dear Blackbird. Still he hoped for the best, and determined, at the very earliest opportunity, to entreat the gardener to spare every Blackbird, young and old, for the sake of his particular friend.

All this had happened in the spring, some months before, and it was now July. The young Blackbirds, hatched in April, had been out and abroad in the world some weeks. They were not yet quite full grown, and still depended upon their parents for help and advice. The parent birds, however, had not a little to do, for by this time they had hatched a second brood, and, just now, these last required their constant attention, although they hoped that by the end of the month their young ones would be able to fly a little. This brood had proved more refractory than the first one, and they were continually getting into trouble and mischief. One of them tumbled into a pool of water, and was as nearly as possible drowned; another was pursued by a cat and had his leg very much hurt; while a third, alas! a poor little

fellow, tumbled right out of the nest one morning, fell on the hard ground, and never breathed again.

But although the Blackbird had his troubles, and serious ones they were too, the beauty and luxuriance of the season rejoiced his heart. The country was in its richest summer garb, even the porch of the old gabled house was covered with pale pink roses. A splendid yellow rose, a *Gloire de Dijon*, clustered round the library window, and a white rose peeped in at the drawing-room. White and yellow jasmin, varied here and there by clusters of deep crimson roses, covered the west side of the house and the old bay window, and the garden below was gay with bright-coloured flower-beds.

Every tree was in full foliage, and the avenue of limes was sweet with small white blossoms, and musical with the murmur of myriads of contented bees, who found some of their sweetest nectar there. The newly-mown hay was falling on all sides, and the trees gave a very grateful shade to the tired haymakers during the noon-tide heat.

The spot, however, which most attracted the Blackbirds, was the kitchen garden. What ripe red strawberries were hidden away under the thick leaves on the long slope of the upper garden! what cool green gooseberries, and what a variety of currants, were fast ripening in the lower garden! The Blackbird would often retire with one or two of his young people to this favoured region. They would first settle themselves at the strawberry-bed, though it must be confessed that this part of the feast was attended with some peril. They felt a certain degree of nervousness, a sense of insecurity, for a horrid net had been stretched over this particular bed, and sometimes the dark feathered heads got caught in it.

One day the Blackbird had a most terrible fright. He and his wife, and some of the young ones, had been hard at work on the ripe strawberries. They had been so busy that they did not hear stealthy footsteps approaching on the sandy gravel till they were quite close to them. Then the birds rose in

the air, with shrill cries of alarm, all except *Mamma* Blackbird, who somehow could not get her head from under the net. She struggled desperately; the gardener was now close upon her. The poor bird, wild with alarm, fluttered backwards and forwards, till at last by a supreme effort, she freed herself and fled away, very much scared, but rejoicing in her liberty. This affair gave all the family a fearful shock, and it was some days before they dared to re-visit the strawberry-bed.

All things considered, though, the strawberries were very good, the birds preferred the lower garden, where they could hop comfortably and securely under the gooseberry and currant bushes. There were no nets there, and the gardener could not pounce down upon them through those stiff thorny bushes; they could feast on the small, red gooseberries, and then, for a change, pass on to the smooth yellowish ones. Their meal generally ended by a visit to a certain bush where the clusters of white currants hung conveniently near the ground.

There was one spot, however, which was perhaps the most attractive of all. On the south side of the garden flourished an old cherry-tree which bore on its wide spreading arms “white hearts” of the very finest quality and flavour. This was a secret corner to which the birds repaired at eventide, and where, curiously enough, the gardener never suspected them of trespassing.

One bright July morning the Blackbird noticed a most unusual stir at the old mansion. There was a good deal of running about, to and fro, and in and out. The dairymaid paid a great many visits to the dairy, and other maids might be seen hurrying in all directions. The small brother and sister had more than once trotted out on the lawn to look at the sky, and make sure that it was not raining.

When the Blackbird happened to fly across the garden he was still more puzzled. Two gardeners with large baskets were stooping over the strawberry beds, hard at work, picking the last of the strawberries. Alas! there would be none left! Another gardener was walking down the rows of

raspberry-bushes, filling a capacious basket with the red and white berries. A small boy was collecting currants in another bulky receptacle, while two more were pulling quantities of gooseberries. What did it all mean?

Later on in the day two large carts quite brimming over with rosy-faced girls and boys passed through the yard, and on into the hay-field hard by. The little ones were soon seated in groups on the soft, sweet hay, and then the old mansion began to pour forth its inmates.

Servant-maids appeared with their gowns tucked up, carrying large cans of hot tea, followed by men in livery with huge platters piled with plum-cake, and stacks of bread-and-butter; and last, but by no means least, the ancient housekeeper, and her special maids, with baskets of fruit and jugs of rich golden cream. Then, last of all, from under the old porch, appeared the mother and father and their two children, our Willie and Alice. Little Alice looked so fair and pretty in her white frock, blue sash, and blue shoes; and Willie's bright young face was flushed with excitement and delight.

Then the Blackbird began to suspect what it all meant. It was Willie's birthday; yes, he was five years old, and he had chosen, as his treat, that all the village children should be invited to tea in the hay-field. It was a great joy to Willie to hand round the cake and fruit, and to watch the little faces aglow with happiness. Willie and Alice, and even their mamma and papa, had tea in the hay-field, and Willie thought that never before had even strawberries and cream been quite so delicious.

It was a lovely afternoon, and it was very pleasant to sit on the newly-mown hay and listen to the birds singing in the trees. Of course, the Blackbird could not resist going to see and, as far as he could, share the fun, and he and his family had a private banquet of their own: for it so happened that one plate of fruit had been put behind a little hay-cock and then overlooked and forgotten, and there, fearless of gardeners or nets, the Blackbirds devoured the last of the strawberries.

After tea games were proposed, and the merry voices could be heard in “blindman’s buff,” and “drop the handkerchief,” until quite late into the evening. By this time the fathers and mothers had arrived to look after their children and take them home, and many were the kind words and warm thanks expressed to Willie and Alice as their graceful little figures went in and out among the groups as they said “good night.”

At last little Alice was fairly tired out, so she was borne away by Nurse Barlow, who announced it as her decided opinion that the children would “get their deaths of cold, and both be laid up the next day.”

Poor Mrs. Barlow had not enjoyed her afternoon. She had been constantly occupied in trying to find Willie and Alice, for, as there were so many children scattered over the field, they had continually escaped her searching eye. Once she had ruthlessly torn Alice away as she was standing between two rosy-cheeked, delighted village urchins, playing “drop the handkerchief.” Each of her little fair hands was clasped by the strong brown fingers of a small village neighbour, and Alice vigorously resented being thus carried off.

“The idea of her playing with them,” murmured Mrs. Barlow contemptuously as she carried her off.

Not long afterwards a shout of triumph attracted her attention to another part of the field, where she was certain “Master Willie” would be found. “If there’s mischief going on,” she said, “he’s sure to be in it;” and when she reached the spot, there he was sure enough, in his best clothes trying to climb the well-greased pole. As may be supposed his intentions of reaching the top, and securing the prize, were quickly nipped in the bud, and he was obliged to make a more sudden descent than he had counted upon.

Notwithstanding these slight interruptions, everything went off most satisfactorily, and all were sorry enough when the time arrived to say good-bye.

The children assembled in front of the old house, and sang a short hymn—

“We are but little children weak;”

and then they were marched off to their different homes, and Willie went to bed, his thoughts full of the happy day they had had, and the words of the children’s hymn still sounding in his ears.

The Blackbird had thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon. There had been no drawbacks. Although he had not been one of the invited guests, he felt somehow that he had been welcome, and he was very pleased to have seen so much of his two young friends, and to have left them so happy.

At this summer-time, it was a great pleasure to the Blackbird during the afternoon to perch on the limb of an old fir-tree on the lawn, and watch the squirrels at their gambols. They would play long, long games of hide and seek among the dark branches, and then, tired of that, they would chase each other from bough to bough, scattering the pine-cones, which dropped with a soft sound on the grass below. Little wagtails ran nimbly about the lawn uttering their shrill “quit, quit,” and catching as they ran the gnats and other insects. The small dark heads of the swallows could be seen as they crouched and twittered beneath the gables of the old mansion, and the distant trickling of water made a soft accompaniment to these varied sounds.

One afternoon when the Blackbird was thus perched on his favourite fir-branch he saw the old Rook sailing slowly by. He had not seen his old friend for some time, so he gladly welcomed and joined him. Away they flew to a copse beyond the lake where hazels and alders grew. A bright, pebbly stream wound through this copse, babbling cheerily as it went, and both birds alighted on an overhanging bough to watch the tiny fish as they poised and darted backwards and forwards. At a bend of the stream a little higher up, a brilliant-hued kingfisher was on the watch, and another bird of much soberer plumage was perched on a hazel bough beyond. He had

yellow legs, a long tail, and ashen-coloured plumage spotted with white, which attracted the Blackbird's attention, for he did not remember ever to have seen him before.

"Do you know that bird?" inquired the Blackbird, nodding in the direction of the stranger.

"Indeed I do," replied the Rook, dryly; "but he's no friend of mine I assure you. He's one of the laziest and most unprincipled of creatures. He has only one good point about him, that's his note, and you must know that well. His 'twofold shout' of *cuckoo* is a welcome sound to every one, for it tells us that Spring is here. As I said, however, that is his only good point,—for, can you believe it? *he never builds a nest!*"

"Never builds a nest!" exclaimed the Blackbird in astonishment, "then where does he lay his eggs?"

"Why," said the Rook, "the cuckoos have the impudence, the audacity, to drop them in the nest of some other bird, any nest that takes their fancy. And that is not all. Not only does the cuckoo lay its egg in a stranger's nest, but the unfortunate bird whose nest he has chosen has not only to sit on his egg, and hatch his great gawkey young one, but has also to feed it, and rear it till it can take care of itself. Nice job it is too," said the Rook with disgust. "Then they are so knowing—ay, they're clever birds! Why they never lay their eggs in the nests of any of the Finches, because they are seed-feeding birds, and the cuckoos know full well that their young ones would starve, because a seed-feeding bird wouldn't be able to rear them. Therefore they always choose the nests of the insect-feeding birds, and they never make a mistake. I wish they would sometimes, then there would be a few less of them! Those little pied wagtails, that you were watching on the lawn just now, often have the honour thrust upon them of hatching and rearing a young cuckoo, as do also the hedge sparrow and the reed warbler. The cuckoos are such cowards too," continued the Rook, "that they sometimes lay their eggs in the poor little nest of quite a small bird who can't even

remonstrate with, much less fight them. Last Spring a vile cuckoo actually laid her egg in a wren’s nest, and the two poor little wrens had to hatch and rear the young monster. You may fancy what hard work it was,—it was nearly the death of them!”

The Blackbird groaned sympathetically, for he remembered his own labours in that line. After a last glance at the kingfisher, the cuckoo, and the winding stream, the two friends flew farther on, over “flowery meads” and shining woods. The hedges were purple with marshmallow and vetch, while in other places the blue heads of the succory, and the pink and white briar roses were luxuriant, not to speak of the pale bindweed which clung so affectionately round the slender stems of the hazels.

The pair of friends alighted for a moment to gaze at all this summer wealth.

“I *do* wish it could always be summer,” sighed the Blackbird.

“You’d soon get very tired of it if it were,” retorted the Rook, “and you would not value the sunshine and flowers half so much if you always had them.”

The Rook.

“Perhaps not,” said the Blackbird, gazing rather sentimentally at the closing blossoms of the convolvulus, “perhaps not, but the flowers are very lovely.”

“Yes,” said the Rook, gravely; “they toil not, neither do they spin, and yet we are assured that even the great King Solomon in all his glory ‘was not arrayed like one of these.’ The great God is over all His works, friend Blackbird; nothing, however small or however insignificant it may be, is overlooked or forgotten by the Creator.”

After a few moments of silence the Blackbird said, “I must be going home; my young ones are not yet able to do without me.”

“Your young ones!” exclaimed the Rook, in a tone of surprise; and then he added, “Ah, you’ve had two broods, I suppose?”

“Yes,” replied the Blackbird, “and the last are still young. My first are now quite grown up.”

“I once knew a relation of yours,” said the Rook, “who hatched three broods in one year.”

“Dear me,” said the Blackbird in a tone of commiseration, “how exhausted he must have been by the time he had finished with his third family.”

“I have been told, and on the best possible authority too,” said the Rook, rather mischievously, “of a pair of Blackbirds who had four families—”

“Oh, pray don’t,” said the Blackbird, as he opened out his wings as if for flight; “you make me feel quite nervous.”

The Rook gave a caw which he intended to be a sympathetic one, but there was a little falter in it, which, had he been a human being instead of a bird, might have been mistaken for a smothered laugh. The birds now rose on the wing, and together flew homewards. While passing the lake a boat and the sound of oars arrested their attention. To watch it as it went by, they settled on the lowest branch of an old beech-tree, which grew at the edge of the lake, and spread its arms over the bright waters, affording a grateful shade to boating-parties in the summer. This tree was quite an old family friend, and generation after generation had gazed at it from the old bay window—generations who had rejoiced in its first spring leaves, and regretted the fall of the last brown one in autumn. It formed a capital shelter for the birds, from whence they could see and not be seen.

Willie and Alice, their mother and father, and Mrs. Barlow the nurse, were in the boat. The father was rowing, and Willie was occupying the proud position of steersman. They soon drew to land and moored the little craft under the shade of the beech-tree. Then out came little mugs, bread

and butter, fruit and cake—they were actually going to have a pic-nic on the water!

Tea out of doors was an immense delight; but tea out of doors and *on the water* was even better, at least so thought Willie and Alice, but so did *not* think Nurse Barlow. She screamed each time the boat rolled, and assured them every few minutes that they would all be drowned. As far as she was concerned she couldn't see "why Master Willie and Miss Alice couldn't have had tea quietly in their own nursery. It was a deal better than coming out there on the water, and sitting under that tree, with all those nasty insects dropping down on them."

Nurse Barlow did not love expeditions of any sort or kind. She infinitely preferred walking up and down the trim gravel paths, with a child on either side of her. She could not bear to see the little curls ruffled, and the fresh white frocks tumbled.

But these were not the sentiments of Willie and his sister, and it is to be feared that they gave Nurse Barlow many disturbed and anxious moments, as they darted away from her to hide behind the bushes, or rolled head over heels in the new-mown hay, quite regardless of clean frock or embroidered suit.

It must be confessed that on this particular evening Willie was in a specially mischievous humour, for, among other tricks, he directed the attention of many small insects to his nurse's gown, where they remained till jerked off in horror by the discomfited Nanny.

The Rook and Blackbird watched the party with no small interest and amusement, and then as the shadows lengthened they flew away home.

It was such a lovely evening that, after seeing his wife and the young ones comfortably settled in their nest the Blackbird took another short flight before going to bed himself.

He halted on a hedgerow in a narrow lane, which bordered a deep wood. The sky was lovely sapphire colour, pierced here and there by bright

stars.

It was wonderfully still, save for those indescribable sounds which ever accompany the close of a summer's evening, those sounds which reveal to us that the great pulse of life is still strong,—strong even at that hour of repose,—the sleepy half-notes of the woodland bird, the "droning flight" of the beetle, or the passing hum of a belated bee. Tiny lamps, the glow-worm's "dusky light," shone here and there from the hedgerow. No step sounded, the air was sweet with the perfume of flowers, and had not yet lost the heat of a long summer day.

All at once, in the midst of the general stillness, there broke forth on the night air a song so strange, so beautiful, that the Blackbird held his breath to listen. It came suddenly; and from a tree close beside him, a sweet low murmuring song, and then it changed to a swift "jug, jug." This was followed by a shake, clear and prolonged, and then came a "low piping sound," which, as the song ceased, the air gave back, as if it were loth to lose the melody.

Once again the song broke forth, varied, and, if possible, more full, more beautiful than before, finishing with the same low pipe. The Blackbird gazed about him in ecstasy; who could the unseen minstrel be?

A very unpretending looking bird, with a brown back, and a dull white breast was sitting on a beech-tree close by. Could that be the minstrel, that plain insignificant looking bird?

And then as the Blackbird reflected, he all at once called to mind who it was,—this songster of the night!

It was none other than the Nightingale, the queen of song, the glory of the woods; and the Blackbird flew back to his nest, lost in admiration of the small brown-coated singer, his heart filled with gratitude for the glorious song.

END OF CHIRP THE THIRD.

# CHIRP THE FOURTH.

## autumn.

The strawberries had entirely disappeared, the raspberries and gooseberries had followed, the last of the hay had been some time gathered in, and dry grass had taken the place of flowery meadows. The corn which had been green and soft was rapidly becoming hard and golden. It was now that the Blackbird became aware that the sun was once more beginning to go earlier to bed, and yet to get up later.

“No doubt the sun is getting tired,” thought the Blackbird, “and no wonder; he has been up and shining so many hours lately. I shall be glad when he has had a good long rest, and begins to rise early again, for the birds are not singing so sweetly as they used to do, and even the poor flowers begin to droop.”

However, the days were still beautiful, though the blue sky was now often obscured by clouds, and the evenings were getting rather chilly.

The oaks were still as fresh as ever, but many other trees had changed their bright green for the deeper and more golden tints of autumn. In some places brown and crisp leaves already formed a thick carpet, and the beeches were fast flinging their ripe nuts to the ground. For all that, it was a

little hard to realise that Autumn had already begun, for many flowers yet lingered, and the white and yellow roses still enlivened the gray face of the old mansion.

However, as the Blackbird had learnt to know, there were fruits and joys for every season, and if the strawberries and cherries had gone, were there not rosy-cheeked apples and delicious pears, which had been wanting in the summer?

There was one apple-tree in the orchard which he specially remembered; he had noticed it in the spring with its wealth of pink-white blossoms. The blossoms had quickly fallen, and he recollected hopping and frisking about among the soft, rosy petals as they strewed the grass. He had regretted the fall of these pretty leaflets, and, of course, had gone to the old Rook for consolation.

“Wait a while,” had been the Rook’s sage remark; “they have only fallen off to give place to something better.”

The old sage was right, they had been pushed off, in order that the apples of autumn might come to perfection. This tree was now covered with rosy-cheeked, tempting fruit, pippins, that were so round and plump, that their skins appeared to have a great difficulty in containing them, and the Blackbird determined that no time should be lost in conducting his young family there.

Accordingly, one fine evening found him on the wing, at the head of his summer nestlings, who were fast developing into grown-up birds. He alighted on a bough, and hopped down from thence to the grass, where the apples lay very temptingly around. Just as he was about to commence supper, he became aware of a very fierce-looking man who was standing with outstretched and threatening arms, only a few yards from the tree.

The Blackbird immediately rose in the air and flew away with a shrill cry, and all his young ones followed him. They did not venture to stop till they reached a neighbouring field. The appearance of the man at this time

was all the more singular, for the Blackbird never before remembered to have seen the gardener in the orchard, so late in the evening. However, the next morning he determined to be there betimes, and to make his breakfast off the apples, although he had lost his supper. As he flew along, followed by his young ones, he said, “Now remember, my children, always to be very careful, and never go near the orchard if the gardener happens to be about, for the hard-hearted man would think nothing of shooting every one of us, and all for the sake of his miserable apples.”

This admonition did not make the young Blackbirds feel over comfortable, and as they hopped to the grass their poor little legs trembled with alarm.

At this moment a shrill cry from their parent startled them, and again they quickly scattered, for the dreadful gardener had already arrived, and was there awaiting them, standing by the tree with his outstretched arms.

It certainly was very provoking and terrifying, and after one or two more feeble attempts upon the apples the Blackbird determined to give up the orchard altogether, for go at what time he might, that horrible, that ugly old gardener was always there before him.

One day he happened to mention his trouble and disappointment to the Rook. You should have seen that bird’s face; his usually solemn expression of countenance suddenly gave way to one of intense amusement, as he replied, “Ah, you hav’n’t been quite so many years about the orchards as I have, or you wouldn’t have been quite so frightened. The gardener has tried that old trick upon me and mine so often that I’m quite accustomed to it. Why, it’s not a gardener at all—it’s a rickety old Scare-crow! However,” he added, as he saw the Blackbird look rather ashamed and crestfallen, “I was quite taken in myself at first; but one day I happened to be passing the orchard just as a gale of wind was blowing, and saw the Scare-crow topple over. Since that day I’ve never been afraid of scare-crows, although there’s an old farmer near here who puts most frightful-looking ones in his corn

fields, worse than any I've ever seen anywhere else. It's of no use, however, we don't care a bit for them. They must find out something much more terrible than scare-crows if they want to frighten the crows or us."

It must be confessed that the Blackbird never had the moral courage to acknowledge how completely he had been taken in, and it was only gradually that his young ones found out that after all the scare-crow was not the dreaded gardener, but only some very shabby old clothes arranged on a stupid pole or two.

It was about this time that the Blackbird haunted the neighbourhood of a certain lane, where the bramble blossoms had been succeeded by the wild-fruits of autumn. The blackberries were abundant, and it was not the Blackbird only who found this lane, with its high hedgerows, an attractive spot. Little Willie would sometimes persuade his unwilling nurse to take that lane on their way home, "just for a treat, you know;" and while the nurserymaid, followed by Mrs. Barlow, pushed Alice in her perambulator, Willie would linger far behind, making many overt attacks upon the blackberries, thereby tearing his clothes and staining his lips and fingers.

One day the Blackbird was much amused at a scene which took place in the lane between Mrs. Barlow and her young charges. The nurserymaid had been left at home, Nanny was alone with them, Willie had lagged far behind, and had stuffed his mouth, and then with some difficulty all his pockets, full of ripe blackberries. Of course Nanny knew nothing of this; she was rather exhausted, and had stopped for a moment, perambulator in hand, to speak to a friend.

This was an opportunity not to be lost. Willie ran up with one of his small hands full of the juicy berries, they were so good he *must* give some to Alice. The delighted little girl opened wide her rosy mouth to receive the fruit. The crushed berries were hastily pushed in by Willie, leaving large purple stains on her lips and chin, and in his haste and fear of being discovered he let several fall on her pale blue pelisse.

It was just at this moment that Nurse Barlow looked round. “Master Willie! Master Willie!” she cried, darting forward and seizing him by both hands, “haven’t I often and often told you Miss Alice is not to have those nasty berries? Didn’t I only yesterday read in the newspaper of three children that were poisoned to death by eating berries out of a hedge—poor little children that had no nurse to look after them; and here you’ve given the darling those nasty, poisonous things. Just look at her mouth!” and she paused as she turned to examine Willie’s pockets. “I do declare if you haven’t gone and put them into the pockets of your new clothes! Well,” said she, appealing to her friend, “did you ever see the like? That’s his new suit, on yesterday for the first time,—and just look!” she continued, as one after the other she slowly turned the pockets inside out, “just look!”

The pockets were purple, as were also the lips and hands of the delinquent, and he really looked as penitent as he felt, though, as Nurse Barlow said, “where’s the use of being sorry when the mischief’s done?” Willie promised that he really would behave better another time, and that he had not meant to do any harm. In the meanwhile little Alice had mightily enjoyed the taste of these her first blackberries, but she and Willie did not forget in a hurry the terrible scolding, and the much more terrible washing, which succeeded that famous day’s blackberrying in the lane.

The Blackbird congratulated himself that he had no blue suit of clothes to spoil, and that his coat was of such a colour that the berries could not harm it.

We have already said that the Blackbird had his interests and pleasures even at this autumn time, but it must be owned that a good deal of life and enjoyment had gone with the summer.

The woods were almost songless, and each day added to the increasing multitude of dead leaves that drove before the wind; each day, too, the bare boughs, once so well covered, flung a few more of their last leaves to the ground. About this time, too, the Blackbird did not feel quite well—he was

listless, his wings would droop in spite of himself. His feathers were not so black and glossy as they had been,—the fact was, the moulting season had begun, and it was some time before he began to feel really bright and well again.

It was also about this time that the Blackbird noticed a most unusual gathering together of the swallows, and a good deal of commotion and twittering. They assembled in large flocks, and appeared to be eagerly discussing some weighty affair of State. After such discussions they would suddenly disperse, but only to re-assemble and twitter more eagerly than ever.

What could it all mean? Of course the sage and experienced Rook was referred to.

“These birds,” he said, “are about to what is called *migrate*, it is a very important event to them, and they hold long consultations beforehand. As you may remember, I told you in the spring they do not spend above half the year in England, and now that the leaves are falling, and the winds are getting cold, they know it is high time to be off. They are wonderfully quick flyers, a few days will find them on the distant shores of Africa.”

“It must be very sunny, very delightful there,” said the Blackbird.

“I daresay it is,” replied the Rook, hopping slowly from one fir-branch to another; “but I had far rather remain at home. Dear old place!” he said, looking at the venerable gray mansion, and then at the beautiful lake and wood behind which the sun was setting. “I wouldn’t miss the winter and spring here for anything that Africa or any other place in the wide world could give me.”

The gray stones and gables were bright with the glory of the setting sun, the ruddy stems of the firs had caught the reflection and stood out in their depth of red from the dark green foliage. Some autumn flowers and a few late roses still gave colour to the garden, and the sound of far-off childish voices echoed from the more distant lime-trees.

Willie came dancing across the lawn, and the perambulator, pushed by Nurse Barlow, followed more slowly. Willie's eyes were sparkling with excitement. He had been out with his father, and had hunted the hedgerows for blackberries to his heart's content. In one hand he held a small basket wherein lay some fresh-gathered mushrooms. In the other he bore in triumph a large hazel branch, loaded with nuts. Just then his mother came out on the lawn, and he ran towards her with eager joy and affection.

"Look, mother! I picked these in the field my very own self. Ain't they beauties?" he said, turning the mushrooms slowly over; "they're for your dinner, and *I* picked them."

They certainly looked very fresh and tempting, with their glossy white tops and soft pink gills.

"Thank you, my darling," said his mother, stroking the brown hair back from his bright face, "I shall like them very much."

At this moment Willie caught sight of a little black head and a pair of bright eyes between the fir-branches.

"Mother," he whispered, pointing to the branch, "that's our Blackbird. He's fond of blackberries; he was eating some in the hedge the other day—I saw him. I have a few in the corner of the basket here. I'll throw them to him."

A few blackberries were scattered on the grass on the other side of the fir-tree, and Willie moved a little further off, for fear the Blackbird should be shy.

"These nuts are for your dessert, mother," he continued, holding out the hazel branch in triumph.

"It is very good of my little boy to think of mamma," said his mother. "Isn't it, Barlow?" she said, turning to that rather exhausted person, who now came slowly up.

Nurse Barlow had not had a happy afternoon. She had been toiling through the lanes after Willie and his papa. The lanes were muddy, they had

gone a long way, and she was very tired. She had made up her mind that the mushrooms were toadstools. It is true that they had come from a meadow in the neighbourhood where excellent mushrooms were wont to grow, but all the same, she was fully persuaded that these particular ones were toadstools, “just such as my poor sister’s little boy nearly died of eating.”

Then again Master Willie had eaten “pounds of blackberries, let alone those nasty nuts.”

It turned out that Nurse Barlow’s fears were happily unfounded, for Willie’s papa had forbidden the consumption of nuts and limited the quantity of blackberries.

Notwithstanding these assurances, “Nanny” refused to be comforted, and as she tucked Willie in his little bed, she soothingly remarked, “A nice lot of physic I shall have to give you. Then you’ll have to stay indoors, and you’ll both be very cross and very tiresome; I know what it will be.”

That night Willie’s dreams were troubled, but they were mingled with a deep bliss notwithstanding. He seemed to be wandering through endless lanes where thousands of ripe and gigantic blackberries grew on all sides,—they actually seemed to bend forward and drop into his basket as he passed. Hazel-nuts were there also, of a marvellous size, and very brown and sweet, browner and sweeter than any he ever remembered to have eaten. He passed from the lanes into a field, where the mushrooms grew so thickly, that it was difficult to avoid treading on them as he walked. What greatly added to the delights of the expedition was the fact that all the time the Blackbird hopped by his side. He, too, seemed to have grown larger, and he was wonderfully tame, and allowed Willie to stroke his glossy head and back. Arrived at the end of the meadow, however, Willie seemed somehow to pass into another lane, and there on the hedgerows instead of blackberries hung curious-looking bottles, and they were all labelled “Mr. Phil Viall, Chemist and Druggist.”

Alas! poor Willie, he knew those bottles far too well. Some of them were yellow and others were white, while a few were dreadfully black. “Nanny,” grown very tall indeed, marched before him down the lane, pointing sternly to each bottle as she passed.

At this moment Willie awoke, and was very glad to find that after all it was only a dream, that the bright morning sun was streaming through the white dimity curtains, and that he did not feel one bit the worse for yesterday’s expedition.

A few days passed away, and the Blackbird found that all that the Rook had told him was strictly true, for before long an evening arrived when a great many swallows began to congregate; then after a good deal of twittering and excitement they took wing, and flew steadily away towards the setting sun. The next morning the Blackbird sadly missed the twitter of his small friends. No little glossy dark heads were to be seen peeping out of the clay-built nests under the eaves, and no white-breasted flyers skimmed the lawn. Yes, the swallows were indeed gone, and the Blackbird sadly realised the fact that the summer and its singers were gone too, left far behind in the months of long ago.

That evening, after watching the flight of the swallows, the Blackbird flew from the fir to his favourite branch on the lime, where we were first introduced to him. He felt rather sad, there was so much that was bright and joyous and sunny to look back upon in the past spring and summer; there was not a little that was dark and cold and dreary to look forward to in the approaching winter. As he was meditating on the past, and thinking of the future, a bright, a familiar note greeted him from a branch close by,—in another moment the Robin had hopped to his side.

“My dear little friend,” cried the Blackbird, “I haven’t seen you for a long time.”

“I’ve often seen you though,” said the Robin; “but what with your two large families, and all the delights and distractions of the summer, you have

been a good deal occupied."

"I haven't heard you singing," said the Blackbird.

"Don't you remember what I told you in the spring?" replied the Robin; "my poor little song is quite extinguished when so many others are singing, but now I am beginning to be heard once more."

Again he poured forth a clear, bright carol.

"As I have said before," remarked the Blackbird, "you are a very good little bird, you come to cheer us just when we want cheering."

"But you're not so down-hearted as you used to be," said the Robin.

"That is due then to your bright little lessons," said the Blackbird gratefully, "and the teaching of our dear old friend the Rook there."

In another moment the Rook, who was passing, had joined them on the lime-tree bough, and together the three friends watched the sun setting, and wondered where the swallows had got to by that time.

The evening was chilly, and a damp mist lay over the meadows, a warning to the birds that it was time to be going home.

The Three Friends—the Robin, the Rook, and the Blackbird.

"Yes," said the Blackbird reflectively, taking up the conversation where he had left off, "I ought to be very grateful to you, Mr. Rook,—and to you, my dear little friend," he said, turning to the Robin. "You, Mr. Rook, have taught me a great deal, and given me a real interest in the creatures and things about me, which I should not have had otherwise. Above all, you have taught me the great lesson of faith and trust. And you, dear little red-breasted friend, have taught me the sweet lesson of content, and not that alone, but you have shown me that each of us in our small way should try to make the world a little better and brighter for those around us. You do it, Mr. Rook; you do it, little Robin; Willie and Alice do it, with their kind

thoughtfulness for us, and why should not I try to do it also,—I will, and this very winter too."

All the birds were grave and silent for a few moments, and then, as they took an affectionate leave of each other before parting, the Rook said, "There was a pretty little poem once written about the Robin. I will repeat it to you before we separate:

"Unheard in Summer's flaring ray,
Pour forth thy notes, sweet singer,
Wooing the stillness of the autumn day:
Bid it a moment linger,
Nor fly
Too soon from Winter's scowling eye.

"The Blackbird's song at eventide,
And hers, who gay ascends,
Filling the heavens far and wide,
Are sweet. But none so blends,
As thine
With calm decay, and peace divine."

Each day now the sun rose later and went to bed earlier. Willie and Alice still ran about the garden, stamping their little feet among the dry, crisp leaves, and picking up the beech-nuts which strewed the ground.

However, as time went on, they came less out of doors, for cold and wet days followed each other, when all that the Blackbird saw of his little friends were the two small faces pressed against the dining-room window-pane, looking wistfully out as the clouds drove past, and the rain pattered against the glass.

At last a night arrived when it was very cold indeed. Through the bare boughs, and on to the hedgerows and ivy, stole down the pure, soft snow. The Blackbird put his head out of the ivy-bush to see what sort of night it

might be, and lo! under the pale light of the moon, all the landscape lay white and dazzling before him.

One little flake dropt upon his head—one cold, soft flake; but as he drew back into the shelter of the ivy, to return once more to rest, it was with very different thoughts and feelings than those gloomy ones which had troubled him the year before. He now knew what the beautiful snow meant. It was the beginning of a hard winter, it was the herald of cold, dark days. But he had also been taught a lesson of faith; he knew of the winter berries which would be provided for him by One who remembered even the despised Sparrows; he knew of a certain bay window where two eager little faces would be watching for him, through all the cold, dark days; and as he closed his eyes, on this the first night of winter, he remembered that little Willie and Alice, and he himself, and all created things, were under the protection of Him Who “casteth forth His ice like morsels,” but Who, in His own good time, would again bring about the “time of the singing of birds,” when, once more, as of old, “the voice of the turtle” would be “heard in the land.”

THE END.

london: R. Clay, Sons, and Taylor, bread street hill, e.c.

Transcriber’s Notes

Typographical problems have been changed and are listed below.

Hyphenation standardized and are also listed below.

Archaic and variable spelling is preserved, including pic-nic.

Author’s punctuation style is preserved.

Illustrations moved close to their relevant pages, and page numbers references removed.

Transcriber Changes

In addition to standardizing hyphenation, the following changes were made to the original text:

Page 3: Was **where-ever** hyphenated across two lines (the little cold droppings seemed to pursue him **wherever** he went)

Page 7: **Ivy berries** standardized to **Ivy-berries** (**Ivy-berries** will be poorish eating day after day.”)

Page 15: Added end quote after **us.** (We do not ‘sow, nor do we gather into barns,’ but still ‘God feeds **us.’**)

Page 15: **lime trees** standardized to **lime-trees** (swiftly passed over one or two snow-covered fields, and then by a long avenue of **lime-trees**.)

Page 32: **laurel bushes** standardized to **laurel-bushes** (he flew off to the **laurel-bushes** by the bay window and sang a song)

Page 36: Removed comma from **“Nanny,”** (he was afraid that “**Nanny**” might find out what they were doing.)

Page 41: Removed begin quote before **“When** (“Oh,” replied the Rook, “the swallows are most curious and interesting creatures. **When** October comes they assemble)

Page 52: **newly mown** standardized to **newly-mown** (The **newly-mown** hay was falling on all sides)

Page 54: **even-tide** standardized to **eventide** (This was a secret corner to which the birds repaired at **eventide**)

Page 60: **“twofold shout”** changed to single quotes (His **‘twofold shout’** of *cuckoo* is a welcome sound to every one)

Page 84: **spring?”** changed to double quote (“Don’t you remember what I told you in the **spring?”**)

Page 87: **bay-window** standardized to **bay window** (he knew of a certain **bay window** where two eager little faces would be watching for him)

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